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Roy Larson – the architect of Philadelphia

BY DENNIS L. JOHNSON

Roy Larson was about 4 decades my senior as an architect in Philadelphia and I first came to know of him soon after my arrival in Philadelphia in 1956. With a fresh bachelor's degree in architecture in my hand and a wife and infant son in tow, I had come from Minneapolis to work for a well-known Philadelphia architect, Oscar Stonorov, and to seek a graduate degree at the University of Pennsylvania. At that time the Stonorov office was on the 19th floor of the Architect's Building in center city where I set myself up at one of the large drafting tables in that office with a sweeping view of South Philadelphia and the Delaware River beyond. The building housed several other architectural firms and some business offices only a few blocks from city hall and Penn Center. About a dozen blocks west just across the Schuylkill River lay the large campus of the University of Pennsylvania where I hoped to enroll for two years of graduate work in architecture and city planning. We had rented, sight unseen, a small apartment near the airport, about eight miles from Center City.

As I became more acquainted with my surroundings, I soon learned that one of the largest architectural firms in our building was the respected firm of Harbeson, Hough, Livingston, and Larson, which had a sizable practice in public, institutional, and educational buildings in Philadelphia and beyond. This firm employed at the time as I recall about eighty architects, draftsmen, and other people. The firm I had just joined had only a total of about six, including the principals and a secretary. Roy Larson was a principal of the larger firm, and I am sure I shared an elevator with him many times in the eight years that our firms shared space in the same building. We did not become acquainted at that time, however; I am not sure I even knew him on sight. Stonorov, about a dozen years later, bought a building on Chestnut Street which we remodeled to our purposes, so my proximity to Roy Larson then became less remote.

It was only many years later that I found out more about Roy Larson, mainly through my involvement with the American Swedish Historical Museum in South Philadelphia, which my wife and I joined in about 1975, after our five small children were older. I was generally aware of the work of Larson and his office and the many prominent buildings they were designing in and around Philadelphia. Eventually I learned more of his Swedish origins, his connections with Minnesota, his education at Penn, and other parallels with my own background and career, both personally and professionally. More recently, I became even more intrigued by these parallels, causing me to undertake added research resulting in this article.

The Swedish background

The parents of Roy Larson were immigrants from Sweden. Per Leander Larson and his wife, Anna Maria Persdotter Larsson, came to the U.S. in April, 1880, with two children, Anna, age 8, and Hildur, age 2. They lived in a small rural village at Fivelstad's *ågor* in Östergötland, as did the grandparents. They came to the decision to come to the U.S. for the opportunities for a better life they had heard were here. They settled for a time in Iowa where a son, Charles, was born in 1881. Another daughter was born, Ida, or Minnie, in 1886. A third daughter was born after the family moved to Minneapolis, Lillian, in 1889. A sixth child, son Roy Frank Larson, was born on 31 August 1893, also in Minneapolis.

A major tragedy befell the large family when the father, Per Leander, died at the age of 59 years in September, 1894, when son Roy was less than two years old. The cause of death is not known. There is no record of how the family survived, but by 1900 the family turned up in Chicago, in Ward 33 in Southeast Chicago near Lake Michigan. The address was a three-bedroom apartment. At that time, the area had

a large Swedish population, so it is possible that Anna Maria had sought out relatives from Sweden to get some help with her large family. By this time the eldest daughter, Anna, now 28, was no longer listed with the family and possibly had married. Roy, now 17 years old, was still with the family as were Charles, Ida, Hildur, and Lilly.

Early career of Roy

Older brother Charles was listed in 1920 as an engineer working for Wisconsin Steel and may well have had some influence on the choice of career of his younger brother Roy Larson, now age 27. By this time, Roy had worked for four years (1911-15) for architects Zimmerman, Saxe, and Zimmerman in Chicago as a draftsman. This was a firm which had originated in Bloomington, Ill, and then developed a practice in Chicago. The office was originally residential, but about the time Roy Larson joined the office, was increasingly doing larger public and commercial projects. In 1915, Roy joined another firm, Lowe and Bollenbacker, until 1917.

By 1918, Roy Larson had enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania to study for a degree in architecture. How he came to seek this degree and why he chose this particular university are not known, but it is likely he was influenced by his associates at the two firms he had worked for, and possibly by his brother Charles. His talent, based on his work as a draftsman, no doubt would have been self-evident to the architects he worked with. Younger architects keep very tuned in to which schools are sought after and what notable projects architects are designing and where they are working.

About two years of Larson's life, 1917 through 1918, are not accounted for in any records. One source, a record of burial, indicates that he was a veteran who served in 1919 with the rank of 1st lieutenant, and another source indicated that he served the U.S. Army during that period. This could account for all or part of this time. Possibly he aided the World War I effort in some

architectural capacity and his rank was to enable him to be compensated in accordance with his skills, but this is only a guess. Larson's mother, Anna Amelia Larson lived until 1934 and died at age 85 in Geneva, Illinois. She is buried in Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis, MN, alongside her deceased husband, Per Leander Larson.

University studies

In any event, Roy Larson enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania in 1918, when he was 25 years old. He soon proved himself to be an outstanding student; where during his years at Penn he was awarded the Huckel Prize, the Faculty Medal, and the Arthur Spayd Brooke Medal. Soon after graduating, in 1923, he added the Walter Cope Memorial prize for his design for "The Remodeling of Franklin Square," one of the five town squares in William Penn's original plan for Philadelphia. The timing of his studies at Penn proved to be quite fortuitous for his own career because of the presence of architect Paul Cret on the faculty during the same years.

Paul Cret was a French-born architect from Lyon and studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He was offered the position of professor of design in 1903 by The School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. He accepted the position and soon became the dominant force in architectural education there. He had a profound impact on an entire generation of American architects until his retirement in 1937. He employed many of his students in his own firm. Four of these were to become partners in his firm, including John F. Harbeson, William J. H. Hough, William Henry Livingston, Sr., and Roy Frank Larson. Roy Larson became partner in 1924, later than the first three, but only a year after he had graduated from Penn.

Employed by Paul Cret

Cret's firm was particularly successful in designing memorials, monuments, civic buildings, the architectural elements of bridges and railroad terminals, court houses, and other solid, official structures. His work remained firmly in the Beaux-Arts tradition while involving modern features and simplified classic traditions. Cret's work included projects such as the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia, several

war memorials in Valley Forge and Gettysburg, PA, and in Europe, and numerous other building projects throughout the U.S. In 1938, he was awarded the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects. Ill health forced his resignation from teaching in 1937, but he continued to serve on the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts until 1945, when he died in Philadelphia of heart disease.

Following the retirement of Paul Cret in 1937 and his death in 1945, his firm was renamed Harbeson, Hough, Livingston, and Larson, after the four surviving partners, which was later simplified to the acronym H2L2 to recognize the nickname which it had acquired informally. It is evident that Roy Larson's abilities became obvious to Paul Cret through his work as both a student and an employee, resulting in his decision to make Larson a partner much earlier in his career than normal.

City planning and more

In 1943, Roy completed a course in city planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to further his earlier interest in that field. In August, 1945, Larson was chosen as the architect for a war memorial to be located on the campus of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) by the Memorial Committee. The memorial includes a memorial court with eight upright pylons and a cenotaph, with the seven Medal of Honor winners from VPI. Below is a 6,000 sq. ft., 260-seat chapel with commemorative sculpture and flags in the chancel. Sculptors for outside and inside pieces were all recommended by Larson.

The H2L2 firm continued on for several decades under that name with a varied and substantial practice. Roy Larson played a prominent role in the continuing success of the firm for the next 45 years as the designer and project architect for many of their projects, most of which were in the public, institutional, and educational realm. The legacy of Paul Cret served them well and helped establish the character and the reputation of this successor firm. H2L2, with which I was familiar for years, was noted for solid and responsible projects which fitted well into their settings and performed well for their clients. This was not a cutting edge firm with daring and radical departures from the norms of usual design practice and did not become idolized by

younger architects everywhere for innovative designs, unlike several other contemporary Philadelphia architects.

Famous projects

Notable projects designed primarily by Roy Larson include the following: the American Cemetery and War Memorial in Normandy, France (1945), the Eisenhower Chapel at Penn State University (1956), the Walt Whitman Bridge (1959), the War Memorial and Chapel at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, VA (1960), the Visitors Welcome Center at Penn Center (1960), the General Plan for Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia (1963), the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington D.C. (1970), Scott Memorial Library at Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, (1970), the PECO building, Philadelphia, the Hetzel Student Union, and several dorms at Penn State University (1976), Mikveh Israel Synagogue, Philadelphia (1972), the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania, and numerous others.



The Walt Whitman Bridge over the Delaware River in Philadelphia.

While all projects are attributed to the firm as a whole, Roy Larson directed his projects personally and was very much a "hands on" architect who became deeply involved in the design of each of his projects. He was in temperament almost the polar opposite of an architect such as Louis Kahn, who has been elevated to almost a God-like status by his fellow architects and students for his own work and philosophy. Roy Larson was too much the reserved Swede, much too modest to ever see himself in the same way that Kahn did.

Soon after his graduation from Penn, Roy Larson married to Olive Alden, in 1924. Olive had grown up in Lansdowne, PA, the second daughter in a large family. Soon after marrying, the young couple settled into a small but attractive home at 110 Owen Avenue in Lansdale.



Roy F. Larson's passport photo 1924.
(Ancestry.com)

They began to raise their family in this house which ultimately came to number three sons, Peter, David, and John. By the 1940's they had moved to a larger home in nearby Radnor Township.

In March of 1924, Roy Larson applied for a passport to travel abroad, returning to the U.S. within 6 months. He stated on the application his intention to visit Italy, France, and England for the purpose of study and travel. He was described in the application as being 5 ft. 2 inches tall, with a medium forehead, small mouth and chin, roman nose, oval face, a fair complexion, and light brown hair, and blue eyes. There is no indication that he planned to travel with anyone, so this trip was no doubt taken before his wedding, and no indication that the trip was actually taken. It was common at the time for young architects to travel to Europe, especially the countries named, to see these locations.

For the next dozen years, Paul Cret continued as the senior partner and Roy Larson no doubt assisted him with the design and execution of his projects. Commissions during this period included work at the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pa., the Rodin Museum on Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia (1926), the Benjamin Franklin Bridge (1926), the Clark Memorial Bridge in Louisville, Ky. (1929), and the Integrity Trust Co.

1957-1960 Roy Larson was a chancellor of the building in Philadelphia (1929), the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. (1932), the Duke Ellington Bridge in Washington D.C. (1935), the Eccles Building in Washington D.C. (1937), and Bancroft Hall at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. (1944). The flow of projects during this period was greatly

reduced by the Great Depression but the office survived this lean period and resumed more work as the nation entered World War II in 1941. Cret's retirement in 1937 caused more responsibility to be placed on Roy Larson and the other partners, and their roles became more prominent.

As an ambitious young architect, Larson became involved in the surge of urban improvements projects which civic leaders turned to upon the end of the Second World War. He joined the Independence Hall Association, founded in 1942 by Judge Edwin O. Lewis, which was formed to protect and enhance the setting of Independence Hall, built in 1747 and the revered location of the meetings leading to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Many prominent Philadelphia figures and leaders were members of this organization. As a national park was being advocated for the area surrounding Independence Hall, the idea to assemble three blocks north of the building began to take form.

The idea for a three block mall was conceived in 1947 by the architect Roy F. Larson and was strongly backed by the Association. This idea ultimately became a joint project of the federal government, Pennsylvania, and the City of Philadelphia, to be overseen by the new Director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Mr. Edmund Bacon. After years of demolition and construction, Independence Mall was essentially completed by 1976. The Liberty Bell Pavilion, designed by Romaldo Giurgola to house the Liberty Bell in its own building, was completed the same year. By about 2000, the Mall was redesigned to accommodate a new and larger Liberty Bell Center, a new visitors center, and a new Constitution Center on the Mall. Roy Larson played a prominent role in the genesis of this idea of an Independence Mall. He went on to become a vice president of the Independence Hall Association and chairman of its committee on research and planning. Later, Roy Larson served as chairman of the Philadelphia Art Commission where his presence exerted strong influence on the designs of many buildings brought for review before the Art Commission.

A former associate who worked with Larson from 1955 to 1974, Mr. Barry Eiswerth, now head of the successor firm

to H2L2, indicated that during much of this time Larson would vacation many summers at a farm in Vermont with his family for from 2 to 4 weeks at a time. He was so tied to his work that he would often forward sketches of details back to his office in Philadelphia from Vermont for use by those working on his projects.

Other civic and professional activities in which Roy Larson participated while engaged in his long career as an architect included serving as an associate trustee of the University of Pennsylvania, a member and fellow of the American Institute of Architects, the T-Square Club of Philadelphia, as chair of the National Committee on the Architect and Governmental Relations, as a consultant for the U.S. Army, as a visiting critic in the engineering department of Penn State University, and as a Director of the Citizens Council on City Planning in Philadelphia. He was also a member of the National Academy of Design, and the National Sculpture Society. In 1957-1960 Roy Larson was a chancellor of the AIA College of Fellows, whose duty was "to preside over the College's investiture ceremonies and business affairs."

In 1955, Roy Larson, as an associate trustee of the University of Pennsylvania, was awarded the 1955 Medal of Achievement of the Philadelphia Art Alliance in recognition of his outstanding achievements "as president of the Philadelphia Art Commission and chairman of its Committee on Research and Planning."

Roy F. Larson passed away on 30 June 1973 and is buried in the West Laurel Hill Cemetery, Bala Cynwyd, Montgomery Co. PA.

Thank you!

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And to my faithful and diligent editor and proofreader, wife LaVonne S. Johnson.

The author, Dennis L. Johnson, passed away on 13 Aug. 2016. His obituary is found in SAG 2016/3.